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## Reflections on the latest WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership

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*The WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership, one of the largest gatherings of WELS and Evangelical Lutheran Synod members, was held Jan. 19–21 in Chicago. The event was a huge success, with attendees offering many positive comments. Jonathan Hein, coordinator of WELS Congregational Services, provides the following reflections on the conference:*

The 2026 leadership conference centered on the theme of WELS' recently adopted long-range plan, "Christ through us." The aim was to draw people back to the heart of Christian leadership: not what we accomplish through Christ, but what Christ continues to do through his people. Some highlights included the following:

- Four keynotes touched on major cultural needs for ministry efforts: courage, character, critical thinking, curiosity, and better collaboration between all God's people—men and women. (About a third of attendees were women.) One congregation president said, "The final day's emphasis on critical thinking—paired with a serious call to better recognize the ideas and gifts of women—will force us to ask different questions about whether our structure really encourages the full body of Christ to serve together."
- Sixty-nine breakouts allowed participants to examine "best practices"—tactical approaches to ministry around WELS that the Lord seems to be blessing. Breakouts on leadership development were especially popular. One lay leader shared, "What struck me was how many breakouts focused on growing as leaders, not growing numbers. The emphasis on character and collaboration was refreshing and deeply needed." Also popular were breakouts on revitalizing congregations and schools. A pastor noted, "After a tough few years in ministry, this was encouraging in the best sense. Seeing what the Lord is blessing elsewhere didn't make me feel behind. It reminded me that he's still building his church, and that faithful work—even in small places—matters."
- One in ten attendees was under the age of 24. This was an intentional effort, not just to equip the next generation of leaders but also to hear their insights on how to better reach and disciple people their age. One high school-aged attendee wrote, "It was encouraging to know that our perspectives mattered. It felt like my church was inviting us to help shape ministry now."

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- Worship was inspiring and encouraging, grounding everything else in the forgiveness and peace Christ provides. Music was led by 20 students from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. The three preachers represented different aspects of leadership: in the parish, in the synod, and in training future workers. Twenty area pastors helped with distribution of the Lord's Supper to the 1,600 WELS attendees.

Rather than minimizing current challenges in congregational life, the conference addressed them openly. Declining participation in some contexts, leadership fatigue, and cultural change were named honestly—yet always in light of Christ's ongoing faithfulness to his church. One leader shared, "I appreciated the honesty. No one pretended ministry is easy right now. But the focus kept coming back to Christ's promises instead of our anxiety. That kind of clarity gives you courage to keep serving."

With that confidence, leaders returned to their congregations, schools, and ministries reminded that the future of the church does not rest on perfect plans or flawless leadership but on a faithful Savior who continues to work through his people.

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*Thanks to Rev. Hein for his summary and to all who planned, presented, and attended this conference.*

Serving with you in Christ,  
WELS President Mark Schroeder 

## WELS annual report now available

**Y**our gifts, God's blessings—An annual report to our members" is now available online. The report tells the story of the ministry that is being carried out on behalf of WELS members through their offerings and includes photos of Christian brothers and sisters around the world and updates on WELS' ministry.

Print versions are being sent to every WELS congregation and individual donor. Additional print versions are available from Northwestern Publishing House for free. Visit [nph.net](http://nph.net) or call 800-662-6022.

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